

New York Music Daily

Global Music With a New York Edge

A Haunting, Ecstatic Evening with the New York Andalus Ensemble

by delarue

Tuesday night at CUNY's Elebash Hall just up the block from the Empire State Building, the New York Andalus Ensemble (<http://www.newyorkandalusensemble.com>) treated the crowd to a slinky, frequently haunting, sometimes ecstatic set of Sephardic Jewish liturgical music from across the centuries. For non-Hebrew speakers unfamiliar with the style, there were times when it was virtually indistinguishable from secular Levantine Islamic bellydance music, reminding how much incredible cross-pollination there was between people of all sorts of backgrounds in that world centuries ago before divide-and-conquer religious politics got in the way. Three especially cool things became immediately apparent. For one, that the CUNY Grad Center's music department (<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/Music>) would have a regular ensemble dedicated to playing such a relatively obscure genre speaks for itself. That this ten-piece group with lead vocals, three choristers, ney flute, oud, violin, qanun and two percussionists would be a SMALL version of the group (they sometimes number as many as twenty-five) is even more impressive. And it was good to see that their excellent violinist was a woman: mixed ensembles are *treyf* (forbidden) in the most orthodox circles.

Bandleader and ney flutist Samuel Thomas led the band through a serpentine, mysterious instrumental before bringing up Yohai Cohen, the powerful, expressive baritone hazzan (cantor) of a Syrian Jewish congregation in Brooklyn. Over the hypnotic clip-clop pulse of the darbouka (goblet drum) and riq (frame drum), the group left plenty of room for solos, many of the songs opening with a taqsim (long improvisational solo intro) from pretty much all the instruments. Cohen colored the resonance of the songs with an impassioned, shivery, microtonal melisma that added to the otherworldly factor: an intentional device, no question. The maqam modes of the songs reflected their regional origins, beginning in the Holy Land before the group took the crowd across the water to North Africa. Once again, the tunes bore a close resemblance to Arabic music from those areas.

A sixteenth-century piece by Israeli kabbalistic rabbi Yisrael Najara had a shapeshifting, almost furtively hypnotic groove that moved uneasily between a waltz and more complicated meters. Another Israeli rabbinical work, from the 1970s, wasn't all that much different, even if the melody was more animated. With the first of the Moroccan numbers, the similarity to Arabic music grew,

with more of a microtonal edge, and more of a rousing, crescendoing, ancient jamband feel: the themes may be somber and even anguished, as Cohen's vocals made clear, but ultimately this is celebratory music. They wound up the evening with an upbeat triptych of praise songs, in the closest approximation of a western major key that they'd used all night, the crowd breaking into a spontaneous clapalong as they'd been doing throughout the show. The full twenty-five piece ensemble will be playing here on December 3 at 7:30 PM; tix are \$12 for adults, \$8 for students and free for concertgoers under 17. And the ongoing concert series (<http://www.live365.org>) with music from around the globe continues here on Nov 20 at 7 PM with Hawaiian guitar sounds from Kekuhi and Kaumakaiwa Kanaka'ole..

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